



Review of: "Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle" (Yasser Elsheshtawy, Routledge 2010)

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► To cite this version:

Denis Bocquet. Review of: "Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle" (Yasser Elsheshtawy, Routledge 2010). 2011, p.665-667. halshs-00638679

HAL Id: halshs-00638679

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00638679>

Submitted on 7 Nov 2011

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**Elsheshtawy (Yasser), *Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle*, London, Routledge, 2010, 294p.
ISBN 978-0-415-44461-3**

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Published in *Planning Perspectives*, 2011, 26-4, p.665-667 (Please quote as such)

This book is an attempt to consider Dubai outside the dominant pictures and to shed light on what the author calls the « hidden urban spaces » (p.I) this city is rich of. It begins with a review of the existing literature on Dubai and on the evolution of Arab cities in the time of globalization. The author takes profit from this exercise in order to criticize the two dominant visions of Dubai: the merely descriptive one and the critical Marxist one, which developed in the wake of the work of Mike Davis. Y. Elsheshtawy argues that both visions share a « common stereotype that cities such as Dubai are not worthy of serious academic study -except perhaps to make a point about artificiality or outlandish spending » (p.6). Then comes a photo essay, in which the author demonstrates a genuine intimacy with the city and which is the true introduction to what he intends to illustrate in the book: a vision of the other Dubai. Houses from the low-income Satwa district, backstreets of the Mena Bazaar, the surroundings of the Hindu Temple in Bur Dubai, the public housing developments of Rashid Colony and Karama, all spaces marked by the presence of a lively urban society, far more articulated and diverse than the usual *clichés* about the dry dialectic between the skyscrapers of Sheikh Zayed Road, the luxury resort of Jumeirah and the workers camps of Sharjah tend to induce. In a chapter about the history of the city, the author also wishes to dismantle myths about « an oil city that emerged from nothing, in the desert » (p.60) as well as the convergence between western stereotypes and local narratives built on another myth: the one « of a miraculous development, guided by the wisdom of the city's rulers », the al-Maktoum family (p.60). For him, Dubai has a history, and indeed a more complex one, which he convincingly presents in a critical perspective. He then focuses on the Bastakiya and Souk Kabir districts, examples he uses in order to uncover the complexity of notions such as heritage, conservation and identity. In another chapter, about planning history, Elsheshtawy concentrates on the various plans Dubai has been the object of: the John Harris Masterplans (1960 and 1971), the Structural Plans of 1995 and 2003 and finally the Dubai Development Framework of 2007 by Urbis Consulting. Even if the author couldn't integrate before publication all current doubts about the actual implementation of the « explosive growth » (p.117) forecasts the 2009 crisis introduced, his critical vision of replacing present developments in what is already a history of planning is very interesting, as well as his reading of the evolution of the relationship between public institutions, consulting firms and private investors. Chapter 6 is a reflection about spectacular architecture. It starts from the time of the construction of the World Trade Center by John Harris, and encompasses a critical presentation of spectacular achievements such the Palm, the Atlantis resort and the Burj Dubai tower. It is followed by a chapter on Dubai's retail landscape. Here, after a presentation of the main shopping malls, such a Mercato, Dubai Mall or Ibn Batuta Mall, Y. Elsheshtawy comes to his most interesting point: informal Dubai, the history of the commerce of counterfeit goods, life in the Filipino district of Karama, the Meena Bazaar, ethnic markets and restaurants, a perspective which leads him to condemn features of strong social segregation which, in spite of his diffidence towards Marxist readings of the city, he can't deny: « great cities are by their very nature integrative -the spectacular coexists with the informal, and city residents have the choice to move between these two worlds » (p.202). Logically then, he insists in the next chapter with what he calls a « counter narrative » and presents Dubai's « forgotten urban spaces » (p.206) and the way in which migrants accommodate places: real life and a genuine urban society in Rashid Colony, Satwa and even in the labour camps of Sonapur and Al-Quoz. In the last chapter, about « Dubaization », that is the influence of the Dubai paradigm on other cities, Y. Elsheshtawy discusses the pertinence of the very concept, and suggests a closer examination of the actual content of the model: architectural forms, processes, relationship between investors and planning. With the examples of Levent in Istanbul, Amelkisi II in

Morocco, the Abdali development in Amman, and of various projects in Cairo, the author invites the reader to defy from simplistic visions about the spreading of the model. This leads him to propose, in his conclusion, a vision of the « true Dubai model » (p.273): « it may be more useful to argue that Dubai is a model for the Arab world not through its megaprojects, but because it accommodates multiple nationalities, a fact that may contribute to its unique response to globalizing conditions » (p.275). But of course this perspective poses the question of urban governance and access to citizenship, an issue that the author does not specifically discuss. The book, however, is a decisive contribution to the necessary revision of existing stereotypes about Dubai, and a very well documented effort to replace perceptions on this city in a scholarly elaborated history of planning and urban history.